

Taking a Fresh Look at Qualifications

Skills for Learning, Skills for Life, and Skills for Work

CASE STUDY: Angus College

Literacy Skills via National Progression Award Construction

What we planned to do

We had been looking at how essential skills could be established as more than the bolt-on activity that it was often viewed as by both staff and learners.

Unfortunately, we were very used to learners asking why they had to do a Communication Unit as part of a vocational programme. This was certainly true of our young NPA Construction Skills learners. We therefore wanted to encourage the young people to see that the skills they would be helped to develop as part of their course, especially literacy and ICT skills, were not just a necessary 'evil'. Rather, they were an essential part of their programme that would give them life skills which would enhance their future employment as well as their personal lives.

*'This course is a "preparing for work" course. It is **not** just about preparing for work in the construction industry.'* (Course team leader)

We realised that before we convinced the learners of this, we would have to convince the teaching staff — and would have to make changes to how we delivered literacy and ICT.

The whole course ethos would have to change.

The course ethos is to provide opportunities for the learner to achieve and attain construction industry recognised and transferable skills through a range of inspirational blended learning within a mutually respectful, safe, fun and praise-conscious environment, ultimately leading to employment.

We were very clear what our vision was and what we required of our staff and learners in terms of literacy and ICT skills. We required staff to work towards developing the following skills with learners:

- ◆ good knowledge of producing professional covering letters
- ◆ good understanding of taking written and verbal instructions
- ◆ good understanding of giving written and verbal instructions
- ◆ good electronic/digital portfolio presentation of work through pictures and video

As a team we looked at how we would achieve all this and decided that our new approach would involve the Trade tutor, the ICT tutor and the Communication tutor. They would work together to identify each other's teaching needs and overlap their teaching delivery to enhance the learning and teaching experience for the learner *and* the tutor.

We also ensured that learners were made aware of the importance of essential skills, including literacy and ICT, at a very early stage. This was given priority in the first five weeks of the course when the learners try all the trades on offer before choosing one to specialise in.

How have we developed?

At first the idea of the Communication tutor actually being in the workshop along with the trade specialist took a bit of getting used to, both for the staff and the learners. We also had the Trade tutors giving support in the ICT classroom. It required us to have regular course team meetings to plan our approach as we wanted a reciprocal team teaching approach, not just an extra pair of hands. Before long, the presence of both tutors was totally accepted. In fact, when learners were asked if they preferred a team teaching approach many had no idea that this was anything special, rather it was the norm.

'I like having Dave and you there at the same time. It means I've always got a second opinion if I need it.' (Learner)

Numeracy was still taught separately but by the Trade tutor rather than one of the Learning Support Team.

Communication and literacy was mostly contextually delivered in the workshops using a team teaching approach. A Learning Support tutor was also allocated to the class so that if anyone required some additional support then this was easily available, usually within the main class activity.

Assessment was done by either tutor. Talking was assessed in a natural way. For example, a learner would explain to one of us how he would build a wall. Even more popular was getting the non-trade tutor to build a wall or similar by following instructions given by the learner! Even the least confident public speaker felt they could do this.

'I'm not super-confident about talking, but it's easier in here. I don't feel like everyone's looking at me and I feel I know the stuff I'm talking about.' (Learner)

'It's easier to talk in here 'cos everything here's to help you.' (Learner)

Writing was assessed in similar ways and reading from trade magazines was popular too. Learners were also encouraged to gather photo and video evidence and to build up both a paper and an e-portfolio which could be given to potential employers. This e-portfolio was added to throughout the course, with the trade tutor assisting in the ICT class. This helped the learners see the programme as a whole and showed how the skills they were learning permeated through it all.

'I've done many CVs before but with Dave's input (Trade tutor) this is my best ever.' (Learner)

The way forward

Following the success of this approach the college hopes to expand it to other programmes. (For example, Trade staff have increased their own ICT skills with the help of the college ICT mentor.)

The e-portfolios created as part of this approach will be sent to employers and hopefully will have a positive impact on progression for the learners.

'We are now looking at how we can use the college e-portfolios as a tool for learning. This space will allow learners to upload documents, etc to their own personalised space. Currently we could use this for CVs, cover letters and individual learner progress — eg written instructions of how to build a certain wall along with images of the learner's work. We hope to expand this by looking into using the blog as a formative or summative assessment tool for their writing.'

'We appreciate that this should not be something the learners are only introduced to through the team teaching approach, but should also be used by the Trade tutors during their teaching time. This will encourage the learners to take more ownership of their individual e-portfolio instead of it "just being used as a tool for the Communication class".' (Tutor)

On reflection

Getting all staff to see the value of the approach was a challenge at first. A recent review suggested that perhaps the project would not be able to continue. Reassuringly, this provoked an outcry from our staff, a few of whom had been very 'lukewarm' in the first place.

'I would be very sorry to see this approach reduced as the benefits to the learners are numerous. The most apparent benefit is that the learners see the Communication tutor and Trade tutor in constant communication where as other courses that do not receive the team teaching approach presume that Communication is a subject which is taught in isolation, and the learners seem shocked to hear that the Communication tutor is, in fact, in communication with their course leader!' (Tutor)

'Personally, as a tutor, I have learned a lot from my learners as well as about my learners. Because I now have a greater understanding of their craft I feel it creates a common bond between Communication/literacy tutor and Craft tutor as well as learner.' (Tutor)

Some learners still had a preference for classroom teaching of literacy skills. These tended to be the older learners who had perhaps done an earlier qualification. We may have to look at other ways of enhancing their skills.

'I've done a HNC so would have preferred being in the classroom to build on that.' (Learner)

Not everything worked as we had planned.

'We tried using Flip videos to assess the learners' reading ability but it did not prove too successful. This is something that we will re-visit and try again with adaptations to see if it will work. The advantage of this is that the learners can give oral evidence instead of writing, which is likely be favoured by the learner.' (Tutor)